

On-Boarding: More Than Just an Office Tour

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At its worst, on-boarding could mean issuing a copy of the employee handbook and giving a quick tour of the bathrooms and break rooms. But for companies concerned with quick ramp up time, retention and performance, the process is much more complex.

On-boarding is not orientation, and it's not a static activity done for a day or a week or a month. On-boarding is ongoing. It is the process of welcoming, training and acculturating a new hire, and this process can take a year or more. It begins before a job offer is made and requires close attention and concise communication.

Don't Call It Pre-Boarding

Pre-boarding sounds like what gold card members do at the airport, but pre-boarding — making the new hire feel welcome, completing paperwork in advance and so on — is actually a vital part of the on-boarding process. In fact, it's so vital that it should be considered the initial phase of the on-boarding process, not a separate activity with a separate name.

On-boarding starts long before the first day of work. George Bradt, co-author of *Onboarding: How to Get Your New Employees Up to Speed in Half the Time*, argues that on-boarding starts at the recruiting stage. "Everything communicates," Bradt said, and that goes for the way recruiters interact with candidates. "Recruit in a way that reinforces messages about the position and the organization. Instead of just 'buying' during the interviews — figuring out if they want to hire people — hiring managers need to be 'pre-selling,' to start convincing interviewees they want to accept if they are offered a job."

Once a candidate has accepted an offer, on-boarding should not begin on the new hire's first day. Mark Murphy, chairman and CEO of leadership and management training company LeadershipIQ, advocates putting out the welcome mat for new hires immediately. "Have all your employees sign a welcome card and send it to the new hire's home," he said. "Also send the handbook, any

marketing materials [and] the policies and procedures. Talent managers can even assemble a 'who's who' roster of employees" so the new hire can become familiar with future co-workers.

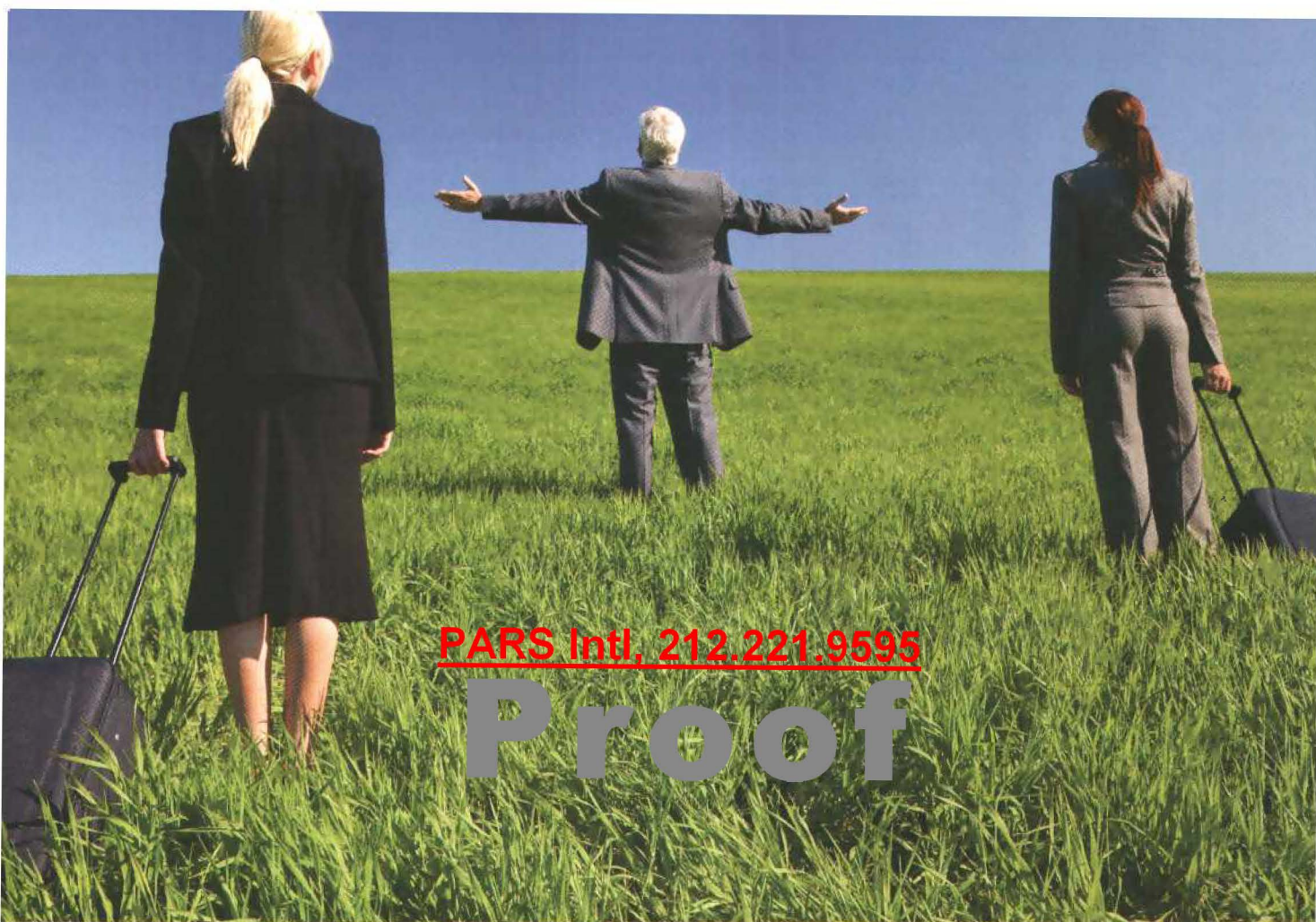
Murphy said, "Companies whose leaders focus on building bonds with their employees in the first 90 days retain more employees during that initial period and tend to retain them longer overall."

Communication as On-Boarding

Building bonds with new hires is important, but managers also need to interact with current employees as part of the on-boarding process. Jean T. Brown, a partner in the coaching firm MacKenzie Brown, said mapping out an on-boarding communications plan can help. "Have one-on-one meetings with those who will be directly impacted by the new hire so that they hear the news first via a message that you control," she said. "Then you can have a town hall sort of event for the whole office or [send] an official memo to all branches — whatever's appropriate."

Brown recommends that talent managers establish four key goals when delivering on-boarding messages. They should be:

1. **Concrete:** Don't talk in concepts; be specific. Many times, organizations will deliver messages such as, "We're delighted that Sue is joining our team — give her a big welcome." Or they might go one step further: "We're bringing Sue in to effect change in the organization." That's a bit better, but it's still vague. What change is Sue being brought in for? To focus on new client development? To expand overseas operations? Those examples are concrete and specific.
2. **Targeted to the audience:** Whenever talent managers communicate with employees, it's not about the



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manager — it's always about the employee. Consider what that person or that group cares about — the answer is usually "me." Employees want to know: How will these changes affect me and my role? The message really should be about how this is going to impact the audience and how this new person will help the team or the organization be more successful.

3. Memorable: Everyone remembers, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." If people can't remember the message, the sender didn't do an effective job. Use interesting language to get the point across.

4. Short: Employees should be able to remember the message and repeat it easily.

When the new hire is actually a current employee who is moving into a new position, management tends to make assumptions about relationships. "Oh, everybody knows Jane already." Saying something like this is a big mistake. Instead of leaving transferred employees to rest on their laurels, people need to earn their credibility. The talent manager can help by carefully crafting a message before the person arrives to create a firm foundation for the employee to build on.

Planning Is Everything

Bradt recommends that the manager get together with the new employee before the start date to co-create a personal on-boarding plan (POP). Not every on-boarding plan is suitable for every person. Each individual has specific desires and needs related to the job that require attention. "One-way on-boarding doesn't work as well," he said. "It's the organization doing something to the employee," rather than a collaborative, organic process.

In the POP, both the manager and the new hire map out the steps the new hire can take before the first day in terms of personal preparation. Who does the new hire need to meet in advance? What paperwork can be filled out early, and what research can he or she do to become more familiar with the company? Then, the talent manager should make a detailed plan of what will happen on day one: key meetings with direct reports, lunch plans and any remaining orientation. Finally, the manager should construct an action plan for the first 100 days and clarify who will do what next.

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The personal on-boarding plan also includes the talent manager or immediate supervisor having critical conversations with people who will be impacted by the new hire. Again, communication is a key and yet often overlooked part of on-boarding. Brown said her experience has shown that management often underestimates the emotional reactions employees can have to a personnel change. Many people will be impacted by fear, loyalty, jealousy and a host of other feelings. It's the new hire's manager's responsibility to get buy-in from employees by showing them how the new hire will make them all successful.

The new hire also can practice proactive communication. For instance, did a future co-worker want the job? "Call that person," Bradt said. "Tell them you know they wanted your job, but it's really important for you to make this work. Invite them to get together, and let them know you really want to get to know them." This forthright approach can eliminate 800-pound gorillas from stalking new employees and can further ease the emotional aspect of on-boarding.

Scheduling for Success

Frank Pereira, managing partner at Coleman Consulting, said he focuses on reducing turnover primarily in the industrial sector — which can average 75 percent in the first six to 12 months — by creating the right on-boarding schedule. "Seniority plays a big role here. New hires get sent immediately to the night shift or are given the bad jobs because they haven't worked their way up like the others have," he said. "So the new hires get trained in the middle of the night by people who've only been there slightly longer" instead of by experienced senior workers.

Pereira said he and his team turn that scheduling paradigm on its head. He works with client companies to schedule new hires for the day shift to give them exposure to the best employees. Only after they are thoroughly trained are they rotated into the later shifts. Workers with seniority don't like filling in those shifts to facilitate training, but communicating is once again key to on-boarding success. He said this method decreases turnover by an average of 25 to 40 percent.

Tony Martin, manager of supply chain human resources for auto parts retailer AutoZone, said he takes


a similar approach when bringing new hires aboard. New distribution center employees spend the first week on the day shift exactly because that is when the skilled trainers work. Distribution center and store employees are shadowed by a trainer after initial training for as long as needed to perfect their new skill set.

Make Paperwork Painless

AutoZone employees have no paperwork on their first day — because it's already been completed. Barring a few states that require a hard copy of one form, the AutoZone on-boarding paperwork process is paperless. When candidates accept a job offer, they use an electronic signature program to fill out and sign all paperwork in advance.

A good on-boarding program often has technology behind it. Online signatures, special Web pages that contain important benefits and policies information, training meetings within internal Facebook groups, videos that define company culture and branding imagination is the only limit for organizations that want to quickly engage new hires. Starting a new job is stressful enough; technologies that welcome employees while providing critical information in familiar formats can make them feel more at home.

Laying the Groundwork for Success

On-boarding is much more involved, complex and long term than a stack of paperwork and a tour of the facilities. But it's worth investing in at every step, from recruiting onward, because a good on-boarding process can foster belonging and dramatically reduce turnover. On-boarding is not just for the new hire or transfer, but also for those who will be directly impacted and may have emotional reactions. For those individuals, on-boarding includes proactive messaging that helps create buy-in and smooth ruffled feathers. Finally, innovative technology use can streamline formerly paper-based processes and speed enculturation. All these elements come together to create a solid, welcoming environment that enables new employees to thrive. 

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